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From the ashes of arson, fire victims await rebuilt condos

BY DEBORAH LAVERTY

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219.762.1397, ext. 2223 | Wednesday, April 02, 2008 | [No comments posted.](#)

LAKES OF THE FOUR SEASONS | A trumpet and a three-strand set of pearls were among the treasures Ruth Ann Teague salvaged from inside the fire-ravaged condominium she called home.

Most of her other belongings, including a circa-1950s baby grand piano she inherited from her parents, were so badly burned or damaged they had to be thrown out.

"I bought another piano in August as well as some new Chinese furniture with symbols of dragons that I'm told will bring me good luck. It has to get better," she said.

Teague's Lakes of the Four Seasons Lakeside Condos home was one of eight that were destroyed during a wind-fueled fire that swept through the complex a year ago today.

The eight condos are being rebuilt. They are expected to be completed in October, condo association president Sandy McMullen said.

"Everyone who lost their condo is moving back. Everyone is OK. It's kind of like death because you have to go through the stages of grief. Now, with plans of moving back into a newly built condo, it's like a rebirth, a new start," McMullen said.

Teague, a retired Gary music teacher, said she wasn't home when the fire started but returned prematurely from a luncheon in Crown Point because she was ill.

"I saw a big black cloud above the condos. I got to watch my home burn," she said.

The fire, which left an estimated \$1.8 million in damage, was ruled an arson, a spokesman for the Indiana Department of Homeland Security said at a news conference held a day after the fire.

The fire originated on the second floor of the southernmost condo at 2551 N. Lakeshore Drive, fire investigators said.

The condo, which was unoccupied on the day of the fire, is owned by the Merrillville-based NSU Corp., which uses it for visiting employees or executives, McMullen said.

The investigation, which has been handled by the Lake County Sheriff's Department, still is pending, county police Detective Edward Jenkins said.

A \$5,000 reward is being offered for information that leads to a conviction in the case, McMullen said.

Her condo was one of the eight destroyed, and she, like the other displaced residents, have had to find alternative accommodations.

"It's been tough for everybody," she said.

McMullen, who lost wedding photos and other personal items she can never get back, said she was thankful no one was hurt during the fire.

"It puts lives in a whole new perspective. You can replace all those things," she said.

Sylvia and Herb Abramson and their granddaughter were inside their condo the morning of the fire and both managed to just grab a few belongings before flames destroyed their home of 14 years.

"It's been an emotionally long year," Herb Abramson said.

The former Lake Ridge School superintendent said he and his wife, who will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary in late June, had hoped to be in their newly constructed condo to celebrate.

"The building will be better than what we had before. It's just a matter of being patient," he said. "We're starting over."

BREAKOUT:

Investigation ongoing

Those with information about the LOFS condo fire, which has been ruled arson, are asked to contact the Lake County Sheriff's Department at (219)755-3346.

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Carroll County Comet

No FEMA money for county flood clean-up

Council preserves road money

By Debbie Lowe Staff writer

Carroll County Highway Department has been virtually unscathed by recent budget decreases aimed at aligning county disbursements with income. This is due in large part because the department is mostly funded with money from the state gas tax, grants for federal highway projects and Economic Development Income Tax, which is controlled by county commissioners. Highway money discussions have mostly been concerned with the lack of gas tax money for road repair.

However highway superintendent Ron Francis was singing a slightly different tune at the Monday morning county council meeting. While requesting a transfer from the Major Moves account to a new line item called "Flood damage and clean-up," Francis announced that, as a municipality, the county will receive no reimbursement for the cost of road repair and debris removal associated with the two floods in January. He estimated the cost to the county for the work at approximately \$280,000, which the highway department will now have to absorb into its operating budget.

Francis explained that although the county qualified for reimbursement, the state as a whole did not.

"We can't continue to endure this," council member Steve Ashby said. "Little surprises like this are killing us."

Council member Ann Brown questioned the wisdom of spending the money for cleanup efforts for which the highway department would be responsible. Council consensus was that had the clean-up responsibilities been left to property owners, they would be, and are being, reimbursed for their expenses.

Francis replied the county could have left the clean-up for residents to do, noting that suggestion fit in with the loss of emergency workers and law enforcement due to a reduction in funding for the services.

Council member Ron Slavens said he was against spending Major Moves funds to pay for trash transfer fees because that was not its stated use. He suggested a transfer be made from dust control for the needed money.

The council approved a \$27,171 transfer from dust control.

DLGF report

Slavens, Ashby and Brown, along with auditor Beth Myers, treasurer Jane Brewington, commissioner Loren Hylton and State Senator Brandt Hershman, met with Indiana Department of Local Government Finance (DLGF) representatives last Friday in Indianapolis. Finance committee chair Brown read a prepared statement to summarize the meeting, which was scheduled in response to the DLGF press release of the week before. The statement noted the county over-reported the amount of available money in the general fund in 2004, which led to budgets being approved the county could not afford.

Brown's report indicated DLGF commissioner Cheryl Musgrave noted that she "understood that communication problems (between council members, commissioners, auditor and other county officials) can be very frustrating and lead to very serious problems if not corrected."

"The biggest stumbling block (for Carroll County) is communication," Brown said.

She said county leaders did not share financial information in public meetings. Brown said she did not know why council was not informed about the error when it was discovered.

"Why were we not advised of the error and why did we learn of it in the press release?" she asked at the meeting.

According to the report, Musgrave said DLGF thought the information "had been passed on to the council."

Brown blamed "lack of sufficient leadership" for the miscommunication. The report stated that in the meeting, Myers said she shared concerns and financial information "numerous times with the leadership and it was not acted upon or obviously not relayed to others."

Brown concluded the bottom line was that all accounts are not balanced between the auditor and treasurer's offices.

"The reason we didn't find the error is because the books didn't balance," she said. "They still don't balance."

"This isn't acceptable. We've got to get that done," Brown continued. "It's not acceptable that this goes on. If we don't balance, we really don't know where we stand. Unfortunately, that's where we still are."

Auditor's report

Myers responded to the DLGF report with a written statement. See inset for the content of her statement.

"I don't believe the investment mistake was understood," she added.

She explained she was a new auditor in 2003 and there were new council members and one new commissioner at that time. She said she would like to move forward together with the council and other county leaders.

Budget

As discussion turned to paying county bills, it was decided to only pay payroll for April out of available county funds because it became difficult for council members to find additional money for claims.

"We can sit here all day but we're never going to pay this because we don't have enough money," Ashby said. "We need at least \$1 million to get to May."

Council voted to apply for a tax anticipation warrant for \$1.2 million from Lafayette Bank and Trust. Council member Carl Abbott volunteered to make initial contact with the bank to set the plan in motion. Ashby said he would also discuss arrangements with bank representatives.

Financial report

Hired to provide a summary of past activity and begin development of a recovery plan, H.J. Umbaugh and Associates representative Paige Gregory advised short-term financial solutions included reduced expenditures, deferred capital costs, institution of a hiring freeze, delay of seasonal hires and consideration of adoption of the local option income tax as an additional revenue stream. She suggested re-appropriation of expenditures from the general fund to Rainy Day, Riverboat and EDIT funds.

No new options not already under consideration were offered for cash flow needs. However, privatizing some services, such as Carroll Manor, was recommended.

Slavens noted the numbers used in the report were provided by the county and were not necessarily accurate. Council members requested Umbaugh and Associates make LOIT taxpayerspecific (what it would mean to different classes of taxpayers) projections and for an effectcomparison with like-counties (with little industry) to support the tax and generate revenue.

Other business

A request to extend the employment date of one deputy leaving county employment due to budget decreases was granted. The deputy is in a refresher town marshal course, but must be employed by a law enforcement agency when the course ends. The employment was extended from April 4 to April 18.

Slavens will develop a plan to present to the Carroll County Redevelopment Commission in order to borrow from the surplus Tax Increment Financing fund.

An inter-fund loan from Local Health Maintenance account to the health department for \$43,657.83 was approved. According to Brown in a follow-up interview Tuesday, the measure was needed because DLGF shifted a portion of the tax rate for the department to help the general fund balance remain positive. The council was not given the information during budget time.

Health department clerk Mary Jones was directed to communicate with the state group that provides funding for restaurant inspections about hiring a parttime worker for the position.

Council recessed for lunch and re-convened at 1 p.m. to discuss further budget reductions. No revised budget was adopted. Another meeting was scheduled for today, Wednesday, at 5:30 p.m. It is expected for final budget numbers to be achieved. The final budget meeting will be Thursday morning, April 3, at 8:30 a.m. to adopt the revised budget.

The Comet will post the revised budget with explanations at www.carrollcountycomet.com after adoption. The information will be posted on the 'County Government Meetings and Agenda' page found under 'links' in blue on the left of the home page.

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Homes and roads still flooded; county officials don't have a solution

[by Nora Gathings \(hsgathings@wsbt.com\)](mailto:hsgathings@wsbt.com)

Months after the winter floods, people in Starke County are still dealing with standing water. (WSBT photo)

By WSBT News1

Story Created: Apr 2, 2008 at 9:30 PM EDT

Story Updated: Apr 3, 2008 at 12:02 AM EDT

KNOX — Two months after the last round of flooding, Starke County still has a lot of standing water. People have been pumping their yards and clearing out ditches, but say nothing is working.

Starke County surveyor Mark Mackillop says the county is in a tough position.

The Kankakee River is still at a flood stage, so there is nowhere to put the water, but many homeowners just want to see dry land again.

"I have joked about putting a boat in for people to come in and visit," said Marlene Stacy, a homeowner.

Water rushed onto her yard and into her home during the January and February floods and just settled in.

"I want to cry. I have cried, but crying doesn't help," said Stacy.

Other Starke County homes are surrounded by water, and high water signs still sit on roads.

Ditches and pumping aren't helping.

"I'm at a point where I don't know where to go. I call FEMA. Can't get any help from them until the water is gone," said Stacy.

Mackillop says they have been cleaning out the ditches, but there's just so much water and nowhere to put it.

"A lot of these places if you put water somewhere else, you are going to create problems," he said. "If the drainage infrastructure hasn't been laid in, you don't have a great outlet to remove pockets of the water."

Under Indiana law, land owners are responsible for paying for drains on their property.

The county can help problems in the Kankakee River. Officials are trying to get funding from DNR to remove logs blocking the river.

"Water will be able to move through the system much more quickly," said Mackillop.

But the DNR hasn't approved funding.

"We are under severe financial restraints, not only with drainage boards -- trying to maintain drains, remove obstructions, repair levies -- our highway department has struggled to keep roads open and have worked over time," said Mackillop.

So many homeowners, like Stacy, are just hoping.

"If more rain comes, yes, it can get worse," said Stacy.

Starke County did not get any FEMA aide after the January and February floods.

Mackillop says the Kankakee River is an inch from flooding the banks.

That has a lot of people in Starke County are hoping for a dry spring.

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On campus

Homeland Security award

MUNCIE -- Connie Swingley, Selma, a student at Indiana Business College, has received a \$2,000 Hoosier Safety Scholarship from the Indiana Homeland Security Foundation.

She was one of 14 recipients of the scholarships, which were presented at the Indiana Statehouse on March 28 to students interested in pursuing careers in public safety.

Swingley is studying for a bachelor's degree in healthcare management. She would like to work in healthcare and is considering a career in emergency management. She is the daughter of Gene and Dorothy Glaze.

The Hoosier Safety Scholarship Program is for Indiana residents who are interested in a higher education degree and who currently volunteer with a local public safety organization. Incoming and continuing students are eligible to apply.

The revenue for the foundation is generated largely through the sales of "Hoosier Safety" license plates.

Information/applications: Indiana Department of Homeland Security, www.in.gov/dhs; click on the Hoosier Safety license plate at the bottom of the home page.

Items can be submitted to On Campus by e-mail (news@muncie.gannett.com), by fax (765-213-5858) or by mail (The Star Press, On Campus, P.O. Box 2408, Muncie, Ind. 47307). The items must be legibly printed and must include the name and telephone number of an individual who might be contacted for more information.

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